Introduction

> The appearance of Galveston from the Harbour is singularly dreary. It is a low flat sandy Island about 30 miles in length & ranging in breadth from 1 to 2. There is hardly a shrub visible, & in short it looks like a piece of praiarie [sic] that had quarrelled with the main land & dissolved partnership.[1]

Despite this rather inauspicious appraisal rendered in the year 1840, Galveston Island somehow managed to flourish. The city that grew up on its barren shores became a focal point in the historical development of Texas and the greater Southwest.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Galveston Island had been a virtual wilderness, inhabited by cannibalistic Karankawa Indians and seething with rattlesnakes and other unappealing forms of wildlife. The Texas Coast abounded with freebooters and privateers. Jean Lafitte, a notorious pirate, established a commune on the east end of Galveston Island in 1817. From this base of operations, he spent the next four years profitably raiding Spanish ships sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. The period of filibustering came to an end in 1821 when Lafitte made the mistake of attacking an American vessel and President James Monroe ordered him out of Galveston.[2]

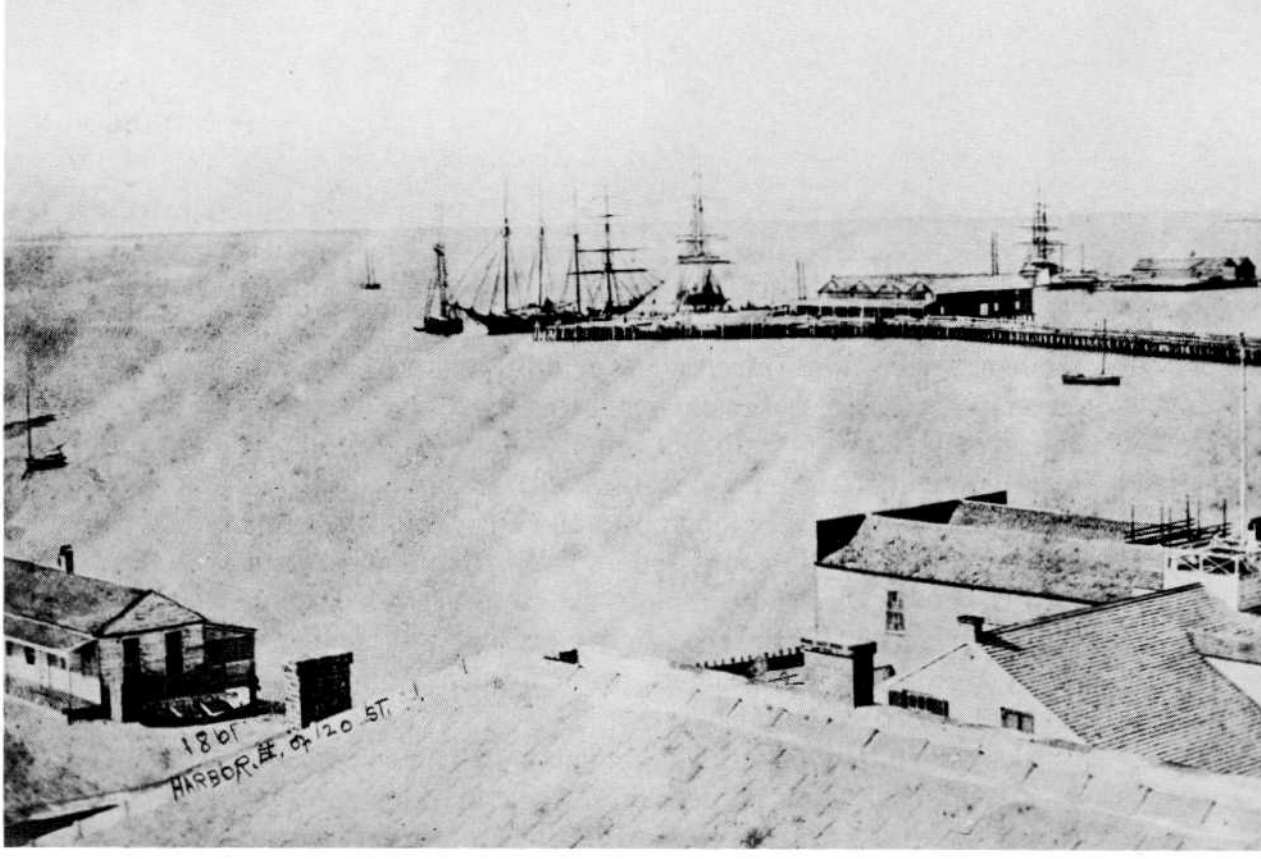
The permanent settlers who followed entertained grand dreams for their city. Blessed with the finest natural harbor on the Gulf west of the Mississippi, Galveston offered promise of becoming the "Queen of the Gulf." Creation of the Texas Republic in 1836 gave rise to an active port, destined to enjoy a prominent role in commercial development of the burgeoning region.

Commodore Charles Morgan opened the Texas Gulf Coast trade. His first vessel, the *Columbia*, steamed into Galveston Harbor on November 25, 1837, initiating regularly scheduled packet service. By March of 1838, over seven hundred passengers had been transported aboard the *Columbia* the 375 miles from New Orleans to Texas. The thirty-six-hour voyage afforded elegance which contrasted sharply with the crude conditions encountered upon disembarkation at Galveston. One early passenger praised the vessel, impressed by "the finest and whitest linen," the attendance of "a lady-like chamber maid," and dining with silver forks and ivory knives at meals prepared by a French cook and served by "curly-headed, rosey-cheeked [sic] Irish waiters."[3]

Immigrants arriving at port of Galveston (Rosenberg Library)

Michel B. Menard, a French-Canadian fur-trader, and his associates purchased from the young Texas Republic a "league and labor" of land on Galveston Island for the sum of $50,000. This transaction, begun in 1834, was finalized in January, 1838. Menard proceeded to lay out the city and to organize the powerful Galveston City Company. Improvement and expansion of the port quickly rose high on the list of necessary priorities; toward this end, Menard and his colleagues donated valuable waterfront property to reputable businessmen who would agree to erect wharves there.[4]

Two prominent merchants, Samuel May Williams and Thomas F. McKinney, moved their business to Galveston. Both had been members



Galveston Harbor in 1861, looking east from Twentieth Street (Rosenberg Library)

of the "Old Three Hundred," the original families in Stephen F. Austin's settlement dating back to 1824. These early Texas pioneers spearheaded port improvements at Galveston. Williams and McKinney began constructing the first permanent wharf at the foot of Twenty-fourth Street and the Strand in 1838, the same year the port of Galveston was opened officially; Gail Borden, who later gained fame for his invention and manufacture of condensed milk, became the first customs collector. By the following year, six steamers were commuting regularly from Galveston to Houston and from Galveston to New Orleans. Activity bustled along the waterfront and the port handled commerce exceeding $1 million in value during 1839. Cotton quickly established its preeminence as Galveston's chief commodity. As a port of entry, the city received waves of immigrants, many of whom chose to remain, adding to the proliferating population of over three thousand and contributing greatly to the city's business and economic life. By 1840, Francis Sheridan, an Irishman in the British diplomatic service, had visited Galveston and described the wharf of Williams and McKinney as "the only interesting spot in Galveston."[5]

Early in 1854, Colonel Menard called together the individual owners of waterfront facilities to consolidate the properties and to place their operation under a single management. The Texas legislature issued the charter

incorporating the Galveston Wharf and Cotton Press Company on February 4, 1854. Organized with a capital stock of about $1 million, the Galveston Wharf Company (as it became popularly known) was set up in an unconventional fashion. One-third of its stock was held by the city while the other two-thirds were held by private interests; however, the city's interests did not include a voting voice. As a semipublic entity, the company was exempted from the usual tax obligations, while it enjoyed total control of the city's waterfront. Although the Galveston Wharf Company's future relationship to the city would be stormy, its control criticized and legally contested on more than one occasion, the company nevertheless exercised complete and uninterrupted domination over the port of Galveston for the next eighty-six years. Its policies would, further, exert a profound and, indeed, ironic influence on the eventual development of the Texas Gulf Coast.[6]

Blocking immediate development were the physical features of the coast. Offshore lay a succession of long, narrow sand islands, between which entrances or passes emerged. The major streams of Texas flowed, largely parallel to one another, from northwest to southeast; most emptied into large bays or lagoons which were located behind the chain of barrier islands. These bays formed tidal reservoirs, into which waters from the Gulf of Mexico ponded daily during flood tide and from which they were discharged through the passes during ebb tide. The scouring effect of these currents afforded navigable depths at the passes between the islands. At the inner ends of the passes, the channels vanished as the force of the flood tide current dissipated in the shoal waters of the bays; at the outer ends, bars tended to form as the passes expanded and the ebb tide current lost its eroding effect. These bars often obstructed entrance to the channels from the deep water of the Gulf.[7]

Such was the case at Galveston. The geographical fact of two troublesome sandbars stood between the ambitious wharf company and deep-water port expansion. Almost from its beginning, the city sought deeper water, but financing and engineering problems stood in the way. The solution to the harbor difficulties would come ultimately from the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

By the time it addressed the problems in Galveston Harbor, the Corps of Engineers was a well-established organization with a history dating back to the American Revolution. On June 16, 1775 — the day before the Battle of Bunker Hill — the Continental Congress had passed a resolution providing for one chief engineer and two assistants to serve in the army. When Gen. George Washington assumed command of the Continental army in July, he appointed Richard Gridley, formerly an officer in the

British Colonial army, to serve as chief engineer of the army and chief of artillery. Gridley directed construction of the fortifications that finally forced the British evacuation of Boston in March, 1776.[8]

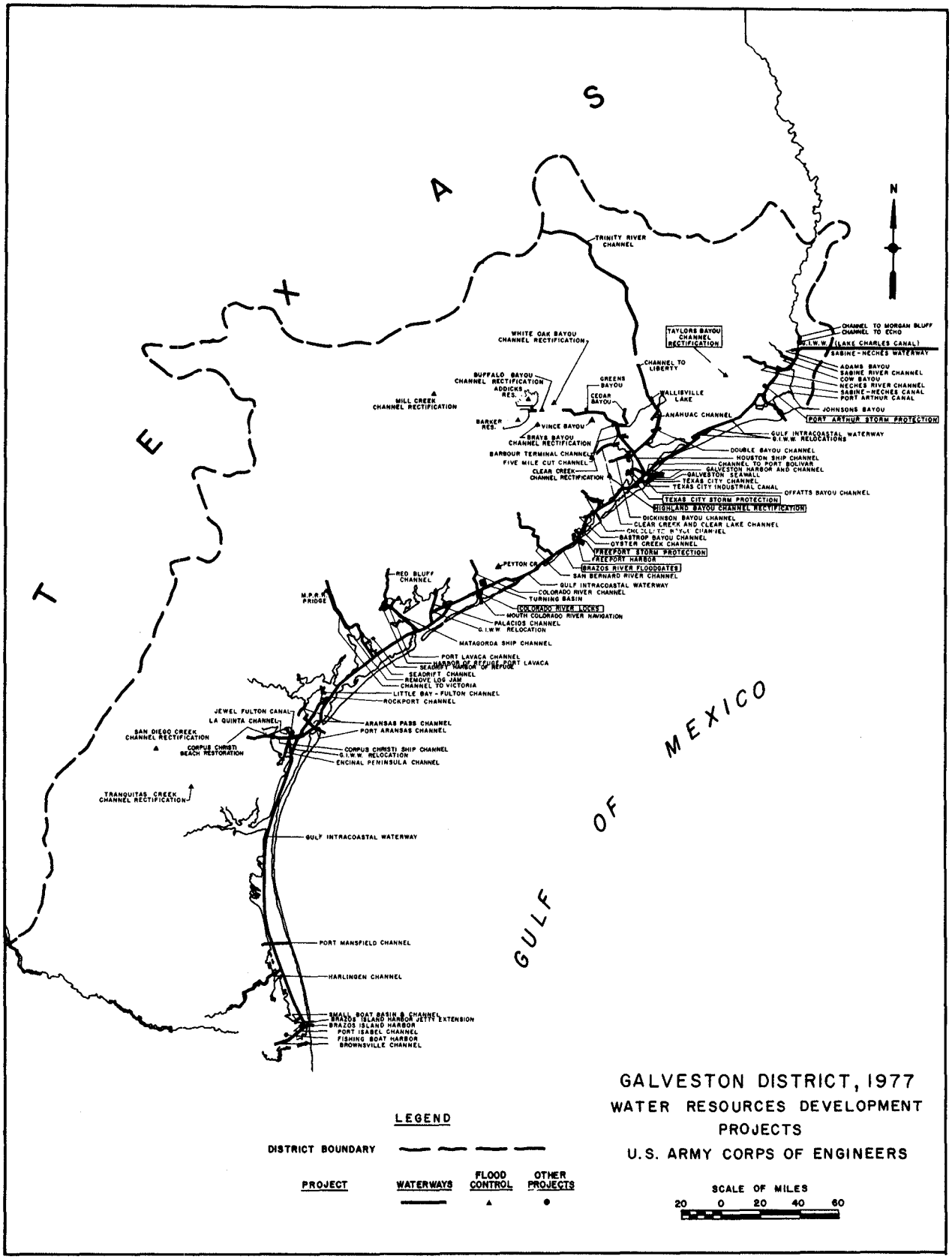
Gridley's assistant in the earlier French and Indian War, Rufus Putnam, accompanied Washington when he moved his army to New York, while Gridley remained to safeguard the New England Coast. In August, 1776, Putnam was appointed chief engineer; however, because Congress refused to authorize an engineer corps, he relinquished his commission as an engineer in December. A "Corps of Engineers" under the command of Frenchman Brig. Gen. Louis DuPortail was formally established in 1779, but was also short-lived, being disbanded after the Treaty of Paris in 1783.[9]

Events of the French Revolution and the war between France and England raised potential threats of war to the young American nation. In 1794, at the urging of President Washington, Congress established a Corps of Artillerists and Engineers to develop a system of seacoast fortifications. This body was abolished on March 16, 1802 by legislation creating the engineer organization that has endured to the present day.[10]

At first, the new Corps of Engineers "constituted a military academy" at West Point. Superintended by engineer officers until 1866, the military academy pioneered engineering education in America and for twenty-two years was the only such school in the country. Up until the Civil War, West Point graduates staffed other institutions as technical training became more widespread. Meanwhile, responsibilities of the Corps were expanded to include many civil as well as military works.[11]

The format for civil works activities developed through an arrangement of local engineer offices (later called districts), each under the direction of an army engineer officer. In 1880, a U.S. Army Engineer Office was established on Galveston Island. Known today as the Galveston District, this headquarters was designated in earlier years as the "Galveston Engineer Office" and the "U.S. Engineer Office." At various times, both the district office and its parent organization, the Corps of Engineers, have been referred to as the "Engineer Department."

The first district engineers reported directly to the chief of engineers in Washington, D.C. In 1888, the Corps of Engineers decentralized, interposing a divisional level between the chief and the district offices. Initially placed under the authority of a Southwest Division engineer headquartered in New York, the Galveston Engineer Office was later transferred to a Gulf Division and Gulf of Mexico Division in New Orleans, and eventually, in 1941, to the present Southwestern Division located in Dallas.[12]



GALVESTON DISTRICT, 1977

WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

LEGEND

DISTRICT BOUNDARY — — — —

PROJECT	WATERWAYS	FLOOD CONTROL	OTHER PROJECTS
	———	▲	●

SCALE OF MILES

20 0 20 40 60

Over the years, the Galveston District has responded to changing times and fluctuating national priorities. Vicissitudes of political climate, economic development, foreign relations, and social awareness together with regional topographic, geographic, climatic, commercial, and agricultural features have molded its unique history. A continuous program of civil works undergirded the activities of the Galveston army engineers, while for sixty-five years a military mission added another dimension to their work.

Boundaries of the district have undergone numerous revisions. Originally responsible for river and harbor improvements in the entire state of Texas, the Galveston District grew to encompass parts of Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Military boundaries, distinct from civil boundaries, included all of Texas at one time or another plus the lower portion of Louisiana. Today, the district performs a civil function in the coastal region of Texas, bounded by the Rio Grande on the west and the Sabine River on the east.

The men and women of the Galveston District have made substantial and lasting contributions to the settlement, development, and safety of the area they have served. This is their story.

Notes to Introduction

[1] Francis Sheridan, *Galveston Island: The Journal of Francis C. Sheridan 1839-1840*, ed. Willis W. Pratt (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954), p. 32.

[2] Conflicting accounts may be found that suggest Lafitte left voluntarily as diversion of Spanish trade made his operation less profitable and a severe hurricane decimated his settlement.

[3] James P. Baughman, *Charles Morgan and the Development of Southern Transportation* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), pp. 21, 24-27.

[4] A league, or sitio, was a common measure in which land grants were parceled out, amounting to roughly 4,428 acres or an area about a mile and one-third square. A labor was composed of 177 acres. Louis J. Wortham, *A History of Texas*, 5 vols. (Fort Worth: Wortham-Molyneaux Co., 1924) 1: 412; Paul R. McGuff and Mary M. Ford, *Galveston Bay Area, Texas: A Study of Archeological and Historical Resources in Areas under Investigation for Navigation Improvement*, Texas Archeological Survey, Research Report no. 36 (Austin: University of Texas, 1974), pp. 25-26; "Port of Galveston's History Colorful," *Port of Galveston* (June 1968), p. 21.

[5] Wortham, *History of Texas*, pp. 421, 426; McGuff & Ford, *Galveston Bay Area*, p. 26; "Galveston's History Colorful," p. 21; Sheridan, *Galveston Island*, p. 50.

[6] E. L. Wall, ed., *The Port Situation at Galveston* (Galveston: Galveston News Co., 1928); Earl Wesley Fornell, *The Galveston Era: The Texas Crescent on the Eve of Secession* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), p. 16.

[7] *Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers to the Secretary of War for the Year 1871* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1871), p. 518.

[8] *Geneses of the Corps of Engineers* (Fort Belvoir, Va.: Corps of Engineers Museum, 1966), p. 2 (hereafter cited as *Geneses*).

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 3; Forest G. Hill, *Roads, Rails & Waterways: The Army Engineers and Early Transportation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 5.

[11] *Geneses*, p. 7.

[12] Adjutant General's Office, General Order (GO) 93, 8 November 1888; Corps of Engineers, GO 12, 3 December 1888; Office of the Chief of Engineers, GO 8, 16 December 1940.